

Trees of Asylum

I silently dropped under a shrub and watched the hidden Frenchmen load their muskets. A few raised their weapons to their shoulders and experimentally aimed at Braddock's army, which marched obvious and red through the sunlight. I cursed under my breath and crept out from my hiding place. If Braddock didn't get word of the secret attack that was poised to decimate his proud troops, he would be caught unawares and virtually defenseless.

As I reached the edge of the forest lining the road, invisible in my scout's uniform of brown and gray, I ducked into the ranks of the passing army. A few of the soldiers, recognizing me, nodded their heads, but I ignored them, intent on reaching Braddock, who rode at the head of the army. Apologizing as I shoved men out of the way with my elbows, I worked my way to the opposite side of the column and ran past the ranks. Even from 400 yards away, I could hear General Braddock as he bellowed joyfully at his commanders. Victory, my ass.

Suddenly, all hell broke through my mind. The reverberating echo of gunfire rattled my skull, and I subconsciously drew my pistol and dove to the ground. The man next to me fell over limply, his chest oozing liquid fit to match his uniform.

Another peal of thunder erupted from the surrounding woods. I fired in the direction of the trees, and the pistol butt gouged my hand.

"Rally!" Braddock cried. I disregarded the command and stood up in a stoop, running bent over in the direction of Braddock's horse, which was visible above the

crouched ranks of soldiers. If he tried to fight this invisible enemy in formation, his men would be butchered like sheep.

A man in front of me screamed and crumpled into a heap, and I jumped over his lifeless body before it tripped me. A bullet grazed my arm, but I ignored the sting and kept running. “Fire!” came Braddock’s order. The shout of rifles deafened me for a moment and I stumbled past the carnage in a blind panic. My throat swelled as soldiers fell all around me, and I picked up my pace, even more intent on telling Braddock to let the men fight the French in a more practical fashion. I knew from my scouting that we had a few hundred more troops than the enemy, and if our men were unleashed in the forest to fight Indian-style, this battle would end in victory. We’d advance onto Fort Duquesne and conquer the stronghold with fewer casualties.

I scanned my surroundings for signs of the General, only to find that he’d disappeared. I cursed, thousands of unwelcome thoughts flooding my mind.

“What a frustrating endeavor this has been,” I muttered, referring not only to our battle strategy, but also my attempt to find Braddock.

“Get back into rank, Gist!”

I turned and craned my neck to see the horse’s rider against the blazing sun.

“General Braddock!” I exclaimed, “I was just looking for you. I think we need to change our battle strategy!”

“Mr. Christopher Gist, if you cannot appreciate the bravery and sportsmanship of the regular, I suggest you make yourself friendly with the enemy. Of course, you are just a militia man. I can’t expect you to understand valor and chivalry, now can I?”

I stared at Braddock in disbelief. I’d always known he was scornful of us

Americans, but he'd never talked to me, his best scout, in such a manner.

"Step back into line, boy, or I'll see you're hanged when we capture Duquesne!"

I sneered at him and turned around, determined to escape this slaughtering of my fellows and friends by disappearing into the forest on the opposite side.

"Don't turn your back, Gist! I told you get back into formation!"

I craned my neck around and found myself staring at the General's gun, which was pointed straight at my abdomen.

"Gist," he started, "you're a fine explorer and woodsman. I wouldn't want to have to kill you."

I looked around. The men surrounding me were firing indiscriminately into the forest, but the enemy's pitiful number of death screams belied their accuracy. I strained my tired eyes for a glimpse of movement among the trees and saw nothing. The organization of the British regulars suddenly seemed to disintegrate into chaos that clawed its way through the ranks. In dismay I watched a group of soldiers dispatch themselves from the rest and begin shooting each other. I turned away from the pathetic scene and locked my eyes onto General Braddock. His steed reared against his impatient yanking, but he managed to keep the barrel directed at me.

"Well?" he asked. "Are you going to--"

A bullet whistled through the air and Braddock convulsed. His body shook and the gun slid from his hand as he slipped off his horse. Groaning about my terrible luck, I darted over to his body and cradled his head. He winced and touched his arm. I noticed that his sleeve was ripped and damp all around, but that wasn't the most severe of his wounds. His uniform was torn at the chest and was sticky with blood. I pointed at a young

soldier who sat fearful on the ground, hugging his legs and staring wide-eyed at the mess of bodies around him.

“You,” I shouted, “get a physician. Tell him Braddock’s hurt. Get him to bring a stretcher out here. And find a way to notify Washington. Tell him to take control of this confusion. We need to retreat.”

The boy stared blankly at me for a moment and I thought he hadn’t heard my orders, but suddenly his head snapped to attention and relief flashed across his face.

I ripped a piece of cloth off my uniform and pressed it to Braddock’s wound. Blood soaked through immediately. The General raised a weak arm to touch the gash, but let it fall.

His lips moved and I leaned my head in to hear. “Fourth time. Can’t stay on a horse, can I?”

The stretcher bearers arrived and nodded to me. I crouch-ran away from the scene, unwilling to stand tall and bravely offer my body to a bullet. I gazed at the hundreds of corpses, noting miserably that many had already been scalped. Bile crept into my throat at the sight of the peeled off skin and frothy skull beneath. I vomited into the blood of their bodies, but could not rip my eyes away from the intoxication of the scraped-off bone and tender flesh. I gripped my pistol and held it to my head. Its metal barrel felt cold against my temple, sending tendrils of chills fluttering up my spine. This wasn’t the first time I’d witnessed such bloodshed, but the fact that it could have been prevented, turned my stomach.

A triumphant screech behind me broke my concentration and I turned, pointing the firearm in front of me. An Indian swung his axe above his head and charged me. My

fingers gripped the pistol and it went off, spraying my face with the sticky insides of my assailant.

“Retreat! Retreat!” Washington’s voice rang across the battlefield.

Indians emerged from the woods and I took a few more shots at them before fleeing into the forest. I caught sight of some of my fellows, and together we ran from that place as if we were foxes in a hunt. Victory whoops and hollers hounded our trail, but they faded as we vanished in the asylum of the trees.

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